THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Divine Question and the Human Question

May 30, 1999

John M. Buchanan

"Who are you? Let me suggest that you are
Formed by God,
Nourished by God's love,
Preserved by God's mercy,
Open to God's promises,
You are the human expression of the Divine hope,
You are God's best and last chance in the world,
You are the means for hope and for love in the world.

Who are you?
That is who you are,
You are all that, and more,
And for that, we praise God."

Sermons
Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living
Peter J. Gomes

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

"The Divine Question and the Human Question"

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
May 30, 1999

Matthew 28:16-20
Genesis 1:1-5, 16-31

"Let us make humankind in our image. . . and let them have dominion." Genesis 1:26

Dear God, we are grateful for the great privilege of being here this morning. We are grateful for the opportunity to join our voices and our praise and adoration in worship. We are grateful for the promise that when we gather in your name, you will be in our midst. Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our minds to new truth; open our spirits to new passion; open our hearts to new love, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, tells a story about a little girl in Sunday school drawing with all her crayons and all her might. Her teacher asked her what she was drawing. "I am drawing a picture of God," the little girl responded. "But, my dear, nobody knows what God looks like," her teacher said. To which the little girl replied without interrupting her intense concentration on her work, "They will when I'm finished." (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 103)

That sounds like a lot of little ones I know. In fact, it sounds like my own granddaughter. There is a sense in which the little girl's description of her task—to draw a picture of God—is what religion is about, and certainly theology. To draw a picture of God is what one hopes and expects is behind this peculiar enterprise called the church.

And it is what one of our most particular, most defining, and most confusing doctrines is about—the doctrine of the Trinity.

This is, you may have noticed, Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost, a day the Christian Church historically has thought about and celebrated one of its central ideas—the idea of a triune God, "God in three persons, blessed Trinity," as the hymn Presbyterians say they love to sing more than any other, puts it.

It is a little esoteric, however. To our Jewish and Islamic brothers and sisters the Trinity sounds like polytheism—three gods. To Unitarians the Trinity sounds like an unnecessary complication of God's singularity and oneness. And to many ordinary believers it is simply confusing.

The story is told of a man who collapsed suddenly on a busy city sidewalk, apparently the victim of a heart attack. A priest happened to be walking by and rushed to his side, knelt over and said, "Are you baptized?"—there was the faintest nod of his head. "But are you

baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?" the priest urgently asked. The man opened one eye and said to the crowd which had gathered, "Here I am, dying, and he's asking me riddles!"

In fact, for the early Christian church the doctrine of the Trinity was a breakthrough in the way we think about God . . .God with three persona—the masks actors wore in the Roman theater. One God—three persona—persons—personalities—roles, if you will. Three ways the one God is known to us—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the creator of all that is—the man from Nazareth, and the mysterious ongoing presence of God in the world and in our lives.

The Trinity is the church's attempt to draw a picture of God but it is also, at the same time, a way the church thinks about how human beings perceive God, about who human beings most essentially are.

Theologians have always known that to think and talk about God is also to think and talk about humanity. Both John Calvin and Karl Barth, four centuries apart, taught that theology is also anthropology. The divine question is also the human question. "Who is God?" has a reverse side: "Who am I?" And both of those questions are the subject of the very first story in the Bible, the story of creation.

The account of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis is often in the news because fundamentalists insist that it is literal history and biology and geology. Creationists insist that it be taught in public schools alongside scientific theories about the origins of the universe and the human race. The problem is that it is not history. It was not intended to be history. It is "a theological reflection on God's creative activity, not reportage," Professor Walter Brueggemann says. It is an exclamation of praise, a hymn, not a history lesson. And what it says about God and about us gets lost in the heat of the argument about whether the seven days of creation were 24 hour days and did it all happen about 4,400 years ago and was Eve really made from Adam's rib and where in the world did Cain get a wife to marry if his parents were the original man and woman?

What the story says about God and about us is very important. And Professor Brueggemann points out it was written at a particular time and for a particular purpose. The account itself is 2500 years old. It was written during the time the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. And the particular problem it addresses is how do we make sense of the fact that we are here and not home where we belong, and that Babylonian culture seems so much more powerful and durable than ours, and Babylonian religion seems so much more logical given the fact that our God apparently failed to protect us, or was looking the other way when our armies went down in defeat at the hands of the Babylonians.

That is the context and it is a desperate one. The people's survival is at stake. The writer, surely as inspired by God as any writer in all of history, suggests that God is the creator still, creator of all reality, even Babylonian reality; that creation reflects God's nature and will and, above all, love; that God's spirit, hovering over the formless chaos before creation, hovers still, still creating, and that human beings have within them God's image and God's breath and God's spirit. The writer suggests that creation is good—all of it, not bad, as some religion has taught; that the material, physical, sensual world of touch and

smell and sound and taste reflects the glory of God; that it is very good, all of it. Maleness and femaleness is good, the story says, not just maleness as religion has often taught. Together men and women reflect the image of God. Their sexuality is part of God's plan and it, too, is very good, not bad, as religion has frequently taught.

The question of God is also the human question in this remarkable story. Human beings are created last, carefully fashioned and given dominion, power and responsibility for the rest of the creation project. Human beings, that is to say, are not just part of the created order. They impact it by their behavior; they co-create with God—a lesson we continue to learn in a negative sense as we pollute air and water and drive thousands of species to extinction. The story teaches that we are God's agents, God's stewards. And our dominion, our status, our dignity, are given to us by God. God speaks to human beings alone in the creation project. Human beings alone speak back. God has created human beings for dialogue—for company—for friendship.

That's revolutionary thinking. The Psalmist reflected it gorgeously:

> Oh Lord . . .how majestic is your name . . .
> When I look at your heavens . . . the moon
> and stars . . . what are human beings—who are we—that you care for us. . .
> Yet you have made us a little lower than God and crowned us with glory and honor.

That was revolutionary thinking 2500 years ago and it still is. And as it confronted the challenge of Babylonian culture 2500 years ago, so today it challenges our culture and the ways it demeans and diminishes our humanity.

The divine question is always also the human question. Who are we? We are the sum total of our subconscious drives, some would say. No, we are actually the product of a genetic code contained in our DNA, others contend. Actually, we are products of our environment, still others submit.

The social Darwinists argue that none of us has particular value apart from our strengths and skills and power; that the weak and powerless are a drag on the rest and probably should be eliminated; that helpful social assistance programs for the handicapped and marginal and hungry and poor, merely prolong our problems.

In a recent essay on leadership, Quaker philosopher Parker Palmer observes that both Marxism and free market capitalism share the same low view of humankind. Both philosophies, although at opposite ends of the economic/political spectrum, share the notion that we are basically material beings. "It isn't only the Marxists who have believed that economics is more fundamental than spirit. It isn't only the Marxists who have believed that the flow of cash creates more reality than the flow of ideas."

Palmer argues that our future depends on a recovery of spirit. "The great insight of our spiritual tradition is that we co-create the world; that we co-create the world in part by projecting our spirit on it—for better or worse." (*Leading from Within*)

Our faith tradition, from the first page of the Bible, tells us that we have within us the image of God, the spirit of God and that God has given us special responsibility dominion, we call it. That is who we are, each one of us.

But one of the realities of the world in which we live is that who we are is mostly a function of what we do—our jobs, our titles, our academic degrees, our rank and privilege.

I was part of an Outward Bound experience one time that brought together 30 people who had achieved a certain amount of success in their chosen fields: being pastor of this church got me into that elite group. The problem was you didn't know any more about the other 29 people than that they were successful in their field. We agreed, going in, not to ask and not to tell what we did for a living. So for several days we sailed and rowed big boats and slept in them at night, side by side, ten of us per boat, and took 5:00 a.m. swims, and did rock climbing and rope climbing and all sorts of daunting physical activities and ate simple food and slept very little without knowing who these other persons—with whom we were living in very tight quarters—were: or more accurately, without knowing where their rank and privilege and service and power were. All we knew was what we experienced of them climbing ropes and crawling up cliffs and shivering in the predawn Maine air before plunging into 50 degree water, which, of course, was precisely the point. It was remarkable. It was the most eloquent lesson I've ever learned about how thoroughly we Americans, at least, form identity, ours and theirs, from what we do for a living and how much success we achieve at it. On the last evening we sat in a big circle and told who we were vocationally. It was amazing. My closest buddy, it turned out, was the CEO of a major construction company that had built many of the nuclear power plants in New England and a devout Roman Catholic. He was very surprised to realize that his best friend in the world for a few days was a Presbyterian minister!

Peter Gomes remembers lecturing to a convention of Fortune 500 CEO's one time in Boston. "One did not really need to ask them what they did," he says, "for they had their names, their companies, their positions on name cards on their left breasts; President and CEO of this, Chairman and Managing Director of that, Chief of Operations of this . . .while it was clear they were more than their jobs, they nevertheless took the major part of their identity from their work, and their work was defined by that little title on their left breast." (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living,* p. 122)

Gomes comments, "One of the recurring nightmares for people who define themselves in this way, by what they do, happens when they no longer do what defines them." For these CEO's, for example, the spectre of retirement or of being leveraged out is worse than the fear of death.

Shortly before he died Professor Joseph Sittler gave an interview to a journal on health care on the topic of aging. Loss of identity is what happens to old people, Sittler said. "The first thing you say to someone after meeting is 'What do you do?' Well, when you don't do anything any longer in American society, who are you? You're a residue of a ruin."

There is, thanks be to God, an alternate word. It comes from the very heart of our faith tradition. It is that you are a child of God, created by God and given dominion and dignity and responsibility. You are a co-creator with God. No matter who you are, no

matter the scope of your professional and personal world, you project your spirit on the part of God's creation that is yours.

Parker Palmer wrote: "The great spiritual gift . . .is to know for certain that who I am does not depend on what I do. Identity does not depend on titles. It does not depend on degrees. It doesn't depend on functioning. It only depends on the single fact that I am a child of God, valued and treasured for what I am."

That has powerful and political societal implications. Cornell West, head of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard wrote: "The fundamental crisis in black America is two-fold: too much poverty and too little self-love." West identifies the self-degrading images of black people that is characteristic of movies, television and particularly rap music, the result of which is nihilism, hopelessness and lovelessness. West writes passionately and eloquently about what happens to little children who must live day in and day out in an environment that says they don't matter to anybody.

Jesse Jackson says that the "greatest cause of social decay in America today is not racism, not poverty, not drugs, not war or violence. Those are all symptoms and consequences, but they are not the root cause of the greatest social decay in our America today. The cause is a lack of self worth, a lack of an identity worth respecting, a lack of self-respect and self-dignity, and that comes from knowing who we really are." (Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 122-123)

"A little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor," is the way the ancient psalmist described you and asked, appropriately, who are we that God so cares about us? It is a question Christians ask: Who are we that God sent his only son to live and die for us?

Who are you? You are one for whom Jesus Christ lived and died. You are God's child, worth the love of God which lived in the life of Jesus. You are given dignity and dominion by your creator and you have the responsibility of co-creating with God the world around you.

Nothing can take that away from you. Not your financial system, not the fact that you can't find a job, or the company you've worked for 20 years just told you you aren't needed. Nothing can take that away . . .not an insensitive boss, an abusive or inattentive spouse, not an oppressive political system, not racism, not prejudice or rejection by anyone.

Child of God—Image of God—Co-creator with God—responsible, accountable, projecting your spirit, and God's spirit of love in the part of the world that is your life, your relationships, your hopes and dreams and passions and love.

There was a book review in the *New York Times* a few weeks ago that caught my eye, *Expecting Adam*, described by the reviewer as a memoir about Down Syndrome, Harvard University and guardian angels. The author, Martha Beck, and her husband are academics, "driven academics" at Harvard, who discovered in mid pregnancy that their unborn son would be handicapped. They ignored the advice of all their friends and colleagues and allowed their baby to be born. Adam is his name and the author writes for all parents who "raise exceptional children and end up feeling privileged."

The review ended with a full and remarkable quote from the book about the goodness of creation, the God-given dignity of every human being, and the way you and I do co-create, with God, the world around us.

Beck recalls speaking to an entering class at Harvard Medical School about her decision and experience:

> **"Adam was asleep on my lap at the time, wearing a bow tie and a dreamy expression. After the speech I was approached by an elderly professor whose name I forget. He had just become the grandfather of a little girl with Down. As he talked to me, he stroked Adam's soft blond hair and wept. He loved his granddaughter with inexplicable openness and the experience had changed his whole life. Now there's a doctor with some real information to offer parents of a (special) baby. Whoever said that love is blind was dead wrong. Love is the only thing on this earth that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy." (*New York Times Review of Books*, May 16, 1999)**

Who are you? You are God's child. You are the object of God's love. God's son died for you. You belong to God. God's spirit is in you. You are God's partner in creation. You have dignity and responsibility. You are crowned with glory and honor—you have dominion.

O Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth. Amen.